

## What is *Aistear*?

*Aistear* is a **curriculum framework** for children from **birth to six years** in Ireland. It describes the types of learning that are important for children in their early years. As a curriculum framework, *Aistear* can work as a **guide** for sessional services in planning practical learning programmes for children in settings such as pre-schools, playgroups, naíonraí, and Early Start Units.



## How can *Aistear* help me as a practitioner in a sessional service?

There are lots of great examples, exciting ideas, and practical suggestions in *Aistear* to help you work with the children in your setting. Many of these have come from practitioners working in other sessional services around the country.

If you are taking part in the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Pre-school Year Initiative) then you will be starting to use *Síolta*. *Aistear* can help you in a practical way to work towards many of the *Síolta* standards. For example, the themes, aims and learning goals in *Aistear* can help you plan a curriculum to help the children in your setting to learn and develop in a way that is fun and challenging for them. If you already have a curriculum, you can use *Aistear* alongside it to build on and perhaps extend the work you are doing with the children. *Aistear* also includes lots of practical ideas and examples for using play to support children's learning and development as well as a long list of low-cost and free resources for play. Or, you might be interested in getting some new ideas for working with parents.

## Where can I find *Aistear*?

*Aistear* is available in English and in Irish at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning). A limited number of CD and print copies were made. One CD copy and one print copy were set aside for each setting taking part in the Pre-school Year Initiative. The CDs were sent directly to settings in late 2009/early 2010. The print copies were sent to the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) in Spring 2010.

## What else is in Aistear?

Aistear has four elements:

- *Principles and themes*
- *Guidelines for good practice*
- *User guide*
- *Key messages from the research papers.*

The *Principles and themes* and the *Guidelines for good practice* are the most important of these.



### Principles and themes

Aistear has 12 **principles**. You'll recognise many of these as they are similar to the principles of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006). Based on these principles, Aistear uses four **themes** to outline what children learn during their early childhood.

The themes are

- *Well-being* (pages 16–23)
- *Identity and Belonging* (pages 25–32)
- *Communicating* (pages 34–41)
- *Exploring and Thinking* (pages 43–52).

The themes are interconnected and link to developmental domains such as PILES. They also relate directly to the subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999).

### Guidelines for good practice

Aistear also has **guidelines** that look at

- building partnerships between parents and practitioners (pages 6–25)
- learning and developing through interactions (pages 26–51)
- learning and developing through play (pages 52–70)
- supporting learning and development through assessment (pages 71–102).

The guidelines include 23 examples of good practice in sessional services. These are called **learning experiences** and they highlight your important and complex role as a practitioner in helping young children to learn and develop. You can search the learning experiences at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning) according to:

- setting type (sessional, infant class in primary school, full and part-time daycare, childminding, children's own home)
- an age group of children (baby, toddler, young child)
- an Aistear theme (*Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*).

See *Learning experience 30: Tractors in difficulty!* which shows how playgroup leader Rosaleen, works with the children to solve a problem they've encountered and builds on this to extend their learning.

### Learning experience 30: Tractors in difficulty!

## Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3

**Age group: Toddlers and young children**

**Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)**

Twins Claire and Robert (nearly 3 years), Lauren (3½ years) and Oisín (4 years) are playing with the tractors, trailers and diggers outside. They are busy digging foundations for a new house they are building. They have filled two trailers with wet earth and stones. The next task is to transport this to the dumping area which is across a stretch of grass. Oisín and Claire set off on the tractors. They quickly realise that no matter how hard they push on the peddles the tractor wheels will not move. The ground is very bumpy and the loads are heavy! Robert and Lauren suggest they might be stronger. Drivers are switched but the problem persists.

They proceed to empty some of the contents of one trailer. This helps a little but it still takes a lot of effort to get the tractor wheels to move. Claire calls the playgroup leader, Rosaleen, to come and have a look. Rosaleen kneels down to see what is happening. Claire jumps on to the tractor and presses down on the peddles with all her might. *See the tractor's got stuck*, explains Claire. Rosaleen announces: *My goodness, why are those wheels not turning?* Jamie (4 years), standing nearby and overhearing the conversation, joins them and takes a look at the tractor wheels. *Granda uses long things of wood when his tractor is stuck in muck*, he explains. *Can we do that Rosaleen?* asks Robert. With Rosaleen's help, they find a large cardboard box which they cut into a long strip. Discovering the strip is not long enough to stretch across the grass area, they cut it in two to make a long path. All five children work together to manoeuvre the tractor on to the cardboard. Claire jumps back on board and presses down on the peddles again. Slowly, to everyone's delight, the tractor begins to move. Soon a convoy of tractors is using the new cardboard road, and the earth and stones get deposited in the dumping area. As the children play together Rosaleen explores with them why the cardboard helped the tractors to move. A whole conversation on friction ensues!



*Reflection: Do I use children's discoveries to help extend their thinking and problem-solving skills?*

## Who else is Aistear for?

Aistear can also be used in

- infant classes in primary schools
- full and part-time daycare settings
- childminding settings.

Aistear has ideas and suggestions for parents to help them support their children's early learning and development at home.



## What's the Aistear Toolkit?

The Aistear Toolkit has lots of resources to help you to learn more about the Framework and to see how it might help you in your work with the children in your setting. For example, you might like to watch the eight-minute presentation which gives a short overview of *Aistear*, or listen to the podcasts on play, or perhaps download the tip sheets for parents on the importance of play for children's learning and development. Over time, the Toolkit will include examples of Aistear-in-action, such as video clips, photographs, conversations between practitioners and children, and samples of children's 'work'. You will find the Toolkit at [www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit](http://www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit).

## Where can I find out more about Aistear?

Many of the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are providing information sessions on *Aistear*. Some of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations are also organising events on *Aistear*. If your setting is supported by a *Síolta* Co-ordinator you can also get information on *Aistear* from her/him. In addition, *Aistear* and *Síolta* are being built into programmes at the further and higher education levels.

